

In Between by frogfarm

Series: [Barb: The Wire \[2\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Badass, F/F, F/M, Gen, Masturbation, Personal Growth, Sexual Experimentation, Subtext

Language: English

Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Barbara "Barb" Holland & Eleven (Stranger Things), Barbara "Barb" Holland & Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Barbara "Barb" Holland, Steve Harrington & Barbara "Barb" Holland, Will Byers & Barbara "Barb" Holland

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-27

Updated: 2018-01-27

Packaged: 2022-04-20 16:31:05

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Chapters: 1

Words: 4,318

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"The continuing adventures of Barb, who lives to tell the tale. And to fight." She may have escaped from the Upside Down, but things will never be normal again.

Barb POV. Post-[Strangest Are These](#); between seasons, and in S2.

In Between

She stumbles toward light, holding onto the Chief's massive shoulder, her eyes locked on the boy resting in his arms. Will's eyes are shut but his irregular breathing, the little hitches in his chest say he's far from fast asleep. And who would be, after all they've been through? How long had he been missing? Lost in the other world, before that *thing* tried to take her as well...

She's about to speak when she realizes they're being surrounded, herded toward a black van by men in equally black suits, others in yellow biohazard with matching gas masks. Too tired to be afraid, too empty to care, she clings to the Chief as they're loaded in, her anchor in an uncertain storm; leaning back and staring at the metal ceiling, hearing the familiar rumble of a diesel engine. The sound of tires on gravel is eventually replaced by the hum of smooth concrete, but the lack of windows leaves her with no visual. Other than Hopper sitting across from her with his head bowed, cradling Will to his chest; the boy himself nearly invisible, swaddled in a ratty old blanket that looks like it came out of someone's trunk.

The van slows and comes to a stop. The Chief looks up, jaw set like iron.

"Let me do the talking."

They can see Will's mom through the one-way glass, pacing back and forth in the tiny white room and holding onto her own arms, a stricken look etched into her exhausted features. The older woman looks up as the door opens, Hopper says her name like it's the meaning of life and her jaw drops, her hand covers her mouth and her eyes go wide as the moon. Then she's on them, gasping and sobbing Will's name as she tries to embrace him and the man carrying him. Barb can only stand off to one side, feeling vaguely apprehensive.

Her intuition proves all too accurate when the black suit brigade returns in force and parts like the Red Sea, backs stiffening further

still as the new arrival ambles in. It's almost a disappointment that he's entirely all-too innocuous: Middle-aged, average height, stocky build and mostly bald, with a greying handlebar mustache and muttonchop sideburns. The white labcoat and glasses only cinch the image of a kindly professor, and he smiles at her with a twinkle in one eye, ignoring his cadre of silent subordinates.

She doesn't smile back.

To her complete and utter lack of surprise -- at least it feels that way -- the suits want them to sign a literal book of intimidating legal bullshit. Which despite the fact that Barb has never said the word out loud is the first one that comes to mind when she looks at the stack of concentrated bureaucracy they plop in front of her, like it's a pop quiz she should be delighted to be taking. She stares at it with a blank look of incomprehension, unable to muster a crumb of outrage.

"No."

She blinks, turning her head. Will's sitting up in his chair, obstinance overpowering obvious fear, and now Barb feels the fire in her own belly. In that moment she's ready to stand her ground right along with him, no matter the cost. Except the Chief is taking him aside, the lecture starting out as a growl before turning soft and reasonable, and she can already see Will's resolve beginning to crumble.

When it comes her turn she doesn't read every word but she skims every page, speed reading at maximum speed just like they trained in debate class. No real surprises, plenty of threats under all the vague boilerplate, to the point she wouldn't be surprised if it said they weren't allowed to tell each other everything they already know. Flickers of blood lick the corners of her thoughts and she envisions these empty grey men trapped in the Night Land, screaming their lungs out as the Demogorgon flays the flesh from their bones.

Finally, she leans over and signs, then looks up at the kindly professor. He smiles, and holds out his hand, and his smile falters as Barb hawks up a loogie from deep in her chest and stares him dead in the eye as she plants it dead center on the page, right over her own looping cursive. She can feel the cold, reassuring weight of Will's knife, deep in her back pocket.

She can handle secrets.

What she can't bear are the lies.

Nancy hugs her to death. Or tries to, and she can only respond with equal fervor, putting all of her strength into it before Nancy gasps and Barb eases her grip. Suddenly she's very self-conscious about her lack of hygiene, but the idea of using the facilities here in the creepy government lab is so not happening. Nancy looks like Barb imagines she feels: Dark smears all over her face, the legs of her jeans, and the haunted look in her best friend's eyes says it all; the way she clings to Steve, likewise bruised and bloody, his swaggering confidence and arrogant sneer having fled before a profound trauma she hasn't seen since her grandfather's whiskey-fueled war stories. And Will's older brother, hovering in the background, unable to take his eyes from them.

The guards don't bother seeing them to the gate, settling for gently escorting them out the enormous metal door without a word, not quite pushing before it slams shut. The sun is just coming up as they trudge down the walkway to the road; Will is still weak but up on both feet, insisting on moving under his own power. Somehow the Chief crams them all into his truck, Will and Joyce in the cab with him, the rest of them back in the bed with no cushions or seat belts. Jonathan grips the ceiling handrail as Nancy and Steve lean on each other, hands gripped together like they've been superglued. Barb stares out the grimy window, captivated by the sliver of orange peering over the horizon as she drinks in the golden landscape with greedy sight. It expands to a slab and then a rising star, forcing her to look away as it lights up the countryside.

Her parents also try to hug her to death. Then they start asking questions, at which point the Chief steps in with stern voice and piercing eyes, making vague references to the even more vague paperwork they've all signed and implying beyond a shadow of doubt that worse will be in store if they keep asking questions. The house is quiet as a tomb when Hopper leaves, her mother blinking like a fish and babbling on while her father's eyebrows knit together at the sight of her torn jacket, the tracing patterns of alien fluid etched into blue

nylon.

She finally pleads exhaustion, drinking three glasses of ice-cold water from the fridge before taking a near-thirty minute shower. Another glass and she crawls between freshly laundered sheets, staring out the window at the swaying oak tree whose reassuring shadows now conceal every manner of untold horror.

Mom's ready to let her stay home the next day, but there's no way they can stop her from going to school; just like always, ever since the beginning, she has to be on the verge of death to even consider playing hooky. Except the usual dismissals, the not so secret giggles to which she'd long grown numb have been replaced by silent stares, obvious whispers when her back is turned. Even the strength of Nancy's hand in hers in that brief moment by the lockers, the understanding in those no longer innocent eyes, doesn't make it easier to bear.

She ends up leaving early from study hall, with Mr. Lee pointedly ignoring her surreptitious exit. Then she walks home the long way, taking in the growing number of holiday decorations. Thoughts of Christmas cheer collide with memories of pain given and received, claws that clutch and tear as glistening fangs yawn wide. Her mother makes roast chicken and Barb stares at the oozing hunk of meat on her plate, trying not to hurl, managing finally to at least get it down.

Thank God there weren't mushrooms.

The next morning, Nancy stops her outside.

"Sit with us today."

Will's brother introduces himself as awkwardly as Barb expects, then spends most of lunch hour trying not to pester her with too many questions about her otherworldly adventure. It's all seeming more unreal every day apart from the scars in her mind, the lingering stains on her jacket that refuse to come out. Still, she can't deny the comfort in sharing her secrets with someone else who understands, who's faced those same horrors and lived to tell the tale. Steve and

Nancy aren't as glued to each other, possibly out of some deference to Jonathan, and mostly they just let her talk. Except once when Steve asks her to repeat that -- did I hear you right, a *nail file*?

"It was all I had." She shrugs, realizing how ridiculous it sounds. "Until I met Will --"

She stops herself before she mentions the knife.

"Geez." The once-proud jock appears well and truly humbled, his hairdo no longer standing quite so tall. "At least I had a bat."

"And fire." Nancy gives his arm a reassuring squeeze. "Don't forget fire."

She balks when Will says they should meet with the other boys. He wears her down through sheer persistence, along with those soulful eyes that only sometimes remind her of Jonathan. The gang are equally skeptical when she first descends into Mike's basement, but she wouldn't have gotten that far if Will hadn't already vouched for her. Halting, unwilling to appear boastful, she tells her story once more to their increasingly spellbound faces, the occasional outburst of amazement or outright obscenity quickly silenced by one another's whispers or elbows. Will fills in the gaps when she inevitably hesitates; thankfully not painting her as some kind of warrior supreme, but treating her with clear and obvious respect. They part as tentative comrades in arms, agreeing to keep each other informed of any unusual developments.

A week later, her parents are out shopping. She's in the middle of doing dishes when a rapid, unfamiliar knock at the front door puts her hackles right up, makes her quickly dry her hands and look out the peephole. A wiry little man in a cheap suitcoat and slacks whose unfashionable glasses, thin mustache and goatee only add to the unsubtle sleaze.

"Murray Bauman," he says when she opens the door. "Investigative journalist."

She nods, feeling secretly vindicated.

"And you're Barbara Holland," he continues. "Vanished for three days. Right off the face of the earth."

She demurs his inquiries as politely as she knows how, but his persistence has the opposite effect of Will's. Her barriers only rise, prickly thorns growing all over, and eventually she tells him to get lost or she'll tell her parents.

Bauman's eyebrows rise above the rims of his glasses. "Usually people say they're gonna call the cops."

Barb thinks of Chief Hopper and stands straighter, staring him down. "I can do that too."

He insists on leaving his card. Along with a warning.

Some things are too big to hide forever.

She goes for walks in the woods alone; something she's never done before, despite her years of scouting experience. Nancy offers to join her and it feels hard to explain without making her appear unwelcome. But Nancy just nods at the look in her eye, and gives her a hug. Barb returns the gesture, unable to keep from thinking of her best friend's twin paramours.

Always, she carries Will's knife.

They make the trip to Akron for Christmas to stay with Dad's parents, along with the usual passel of visiting relatives. The kids are getting old enough to require less in the way of babysitting, and she finds a small park to hike through, its dormant gardens shrouded in snow. The still and silent chill is a balm to her senses, long scraped to the bone; the stars above like beacons of hope, another thing notable for their absence in the Night Land -- never mind what Will's friends might call it, she still can't think of it as the Upside Down and she hasn't dared ask what they might know of the mysterious girl who saved them, who slew the demon and opened the gate for her and

Will. The Chief might have carried them across the threshold between worlds, but that pale girl with the shaven head and steely gaze was the one who brought them home.

"You shouldn't go there alone," Aunt Tina clucks on her return. "Full of bums and thieves."

Barb shrugs.

"I didn't see anyone."

The new year begins with little fanfare, and life slowly continues to be normal. Apart from the somewhat surreal relationship between Nancy and Steve; Jonathan orbiting both from afar, occasionally coming within range of something approaching intimacy. Barb can't imagine the three of them sleeping together, but she understands the power of adrenaline, the bond of shared survival. Almost a shame Will wasn't her age. Or maybe that would have been too much distraction, gotten her killed off at some critical moment for the sake of a cheap thrill.

She first rediscovers the pleasure to be found in her own body while taking yet another hot shower, one of the perks of civilization she's decided she'll never get enough of. That she's never engaged in this sort of play to any serious degree doesn't stop her from eagerly pursuing the brief thrill of soap-slick fingers, quickly losing herself to shuddering ecstasy without a thought to how ridiculous she must look, biting her lip to hold back the screams. She smiles at her parents over dinner, and when Barb goes to bed that night she does it all over again.

Only harder.

"They want us to go back there." Resentment and dread war on Will's face. "Back to the lab. So they can run *tests*."

She doesn't have to think it over for long. "I think you should go."

The gloomy expression grows even more fatalistic. "Like I have a choice?"

"Probably not." Barb resists the urge to pat him on the shoulder. That's for kids who haven't been to the Night Land. Who are still kids, not casualties of war. "But this is how we keep an eye on them, too."

Understanding shines in his eyes. "I'm like a spy."

"Yeah." She smiles, and settles for an affectionate squeeze of his shoulder. "You're a spy."

Will's appointment goes without incident, but nobody is surprised when the white coats and black suits insist on regular followups. Jonathan naturally insists on sticking with his family, leaving Nancy and Steve without their third wheel. It doesn't make it unbearable, being around them, but the sexual tension and awkward silence is growing harder to ignore.

She's almost late for class one morning, hurrying across the parking lot when an obnoxiously sleek and muscular car barrels in front of her, grinding to a halt with a roar of metal from its equally overpowered speakers. A tiny ginger girl with long, straight hair hops out of the passenger side, sending a guilty look at her before dropping a skateboard to the cement and speeding off.

Barb stares after her before realizing that the driver too has disembarked; denim jacket parted just so, revealing a smooth chest beneath. Taking an unhealthy drag on what is undoubtedly a Marlboro Red, he smiles and stretches and shakes his perfectly curled mane in the sunshine. He's halfway to the door when he senses her eyes still on him, turning and regarding her with an insolent air.

His eyes drop to his own ass and rise back to hers with a grin, like he's busted her for sure. Except something is changing as he looks her over, though Barb knows her face is utterly neutral; not a hint of humor or disdain.

Even his curled lip is sexy. "Like what you see, Red?"

It just comes out. "I might have, until you opened your mouth."

Apparently, he's having just as much trouble believing she said it. Then he throws his head back and *barks*, an angry laugh that turns to a low snarl deep in his throat.

"Figured you and that Wheeler chick were lezzin' it up. Since she ran crying from her pussy boyfriend." Cruelty dances in his eyes, shines off his teeth. "I see the way you look at her. Whole school does."

"Oh?" Cold rage settles in, hardening to stone. "Like the way you look at her pussy boyfriend in gym class?"

His face contorts and he takes a step toward her, balling up his fists. Barb just moves one foot back and plants it firm on the pavement, far hand going under her coat to the blade in her pocket even as something screams this is no alien monster, this is the real world and there will be consequences. Except something in her eye gives him pause, and he backs off with a sneer, throwing a final jab over his shoulder.

"Fuckin' dyke."

The words sting too long afterward, in some ways worse than the acidic slime of her nightmares, doubly so for their sheer pettiness. She imagines his face at the sight of the Demogorgon, feeling guilty even before that comfort turns to seeing him rent to ribbons under razor-sharp fingers, coming apart in its gaping maw. Then it's back to sleeping with one eye open, the knife once more beneath her pillow instead of its secret spot in the back of her dresser drawer.

Don't be scared.

She doesn't know if she's awake or asleep. But the strange girl's words echo in her head, the voice of experience.

Be smart.

"I swear, kid. If this is some Halloween prank --"

"It's not a prank!"

Barb ignores the boys, remaining focused on the rusting metal doors, the flimsy length of chain holding them shut. Dustin's former pet is silent; not a whisper of motion from below, no hint of a sound.

"Give me that." She takes the flashlight from Steve, training it on the padlock. "Open it."

Dustin shoots a nervous look at the older boy before shuffling forward. He kneels and fumbles with the key, and Barb clamps down on her own adrenaline, forcing herself to breathe slower as the lock slips free.

"I'm right behind you."

Steve raises the bat in a firm double grip, light glinting off from the nails bristling from its business end. Without a backward glance, he descends the steps in a loose side stance that looks downright ninja.

Barb follows, moving the beam around a bit before finding the optimal angle. They reach the bottom faster than she'd like, and when Steve pulls the chain for the single bulb, illuminating the dripping pile of skin on the ground, the scattered blocks of masonry and the gaping freshly dug hole, they have only two words. Which Dustin echoes as he stumbles down the stairs in their wake, curiosity having overpowered fear:

"Oh, shit."

"Steve? Steve, what are you doing --"

"Just get ready."

Barb looks around in dismay as a growl echoes from outside, across the entire junkyard. This isn't right. They haven't retreated to a safe space.

They've been herded.

"Steve!" The fear in Lucas's voice mirrors her own rising flight reflex. Little gasps and moans come from the others, now themselves in the throes of realization.

"Abort!" Dustin yells, frantic. "Abort, abort --"

Their would-be paladin hits the doors at a dead run, slamming them shut in his wake. A second later the bus rocks from the impact, followed by a full-throated roar of frustration, an answering chorus of howls erupting from all around.

"Are they rabid?" Max is fast approaching panic. Barb finds her hand and presses Will's knife into it, closing the girl's fingers around it; radiating calm and assurance even she can only partly believe.

"Keep it." Barb holds up the spiked bat with a grin. "I brought my own."

Somehow, they survive. And finally they're all together again, apart from the luckless Bob Newby and Barb can't silence the endless recriminations of her own thoughts. If only she'd been faster; if only she'd still had her knife. If she'd seen the other two demon dogs, coming out of the shadows --

"Stop." Eleven's glare is hard, the girl's eyes more startling than memory surrounded by black circles of kohl, her slicked-back hair making Barb think of teen idols on the covers of her mother's album collection.

"I'm trying," Barb mumbles. She reaches out an awkward hand, and the brief contact turns into a hug before they know it.

After that, the speed of planning accelerates considerably, and soon it's time for the party to separate once more, thus proving that Will really is rubbing off on her. Hopper and Eleven are off to the lab, to try to close the gate; Joyce, Nancy and Jonathan taking Will to the Chief's cabin, with Mrs. Byers blissfully unaware of Dustin's plans for her refrigerator.

Barb levels a look of distaste at Steve. "Are you really going to let him just leave it in there?"

Steve shrugs, exhaustion and stress clearly taking their toll. "He's the one that has to explain himself later. I told him --"

A familiar engine revs outside, followed by the scrunch of tires on gravel. Max jerks away from the window, red hair more vivid than ever against the sudden draining of blood from her face.

"It's my brother!" The girl's terror is naked and raw, putting the Demogorgon to shame. "He can't know I'm here! He'll kill me --"

Barb holds her steady, hand on one shoulder as she watches the door close behind Steve. From outside she can hear voices, male posturing more than evident through the indistinct words. Mike and the rest fidget in a cluster beside her, muttering amongst themselves.

Something cold touches her skin, and she looks down.

"Take it." Max looks up at her, pleading, pushing the knife against her fingers. "Take it back. I'll kill him, I swear --"

The door explodes open and Billy strides in, cigarette dangling from his lips. Behind him and through the doorway, Steve lies sprawled in the dirt, clutching his ribs.

"Well, well, well." The mocking smile is devoid of humor, reeking of contempt. "Lucas Sinclair. What a surprise."

Lucas takes a step back, wide-eyed. Steve crawls to his feet and begins to stagger toward the house, one hand to his side.

"And you." Billy stares at Barb, at her hand on Max's shoulder. "Get your fuckin' hands off my sister."

"Go away!" Max shouts. Her own fists are clenched at her sides, the rage on her face a mirror of his own.

"Thought I told you to stay away from him, Max." Billy saunters forward and leans on the wall, taking another drag off his cigarette.

"Put that outside."

"What the fuck?" The mullet-headed maniac stares at Barb like she's the crazy one.

"You heard me." She doesn't flinch. "No smoking in Mrs. Byer's house."

His mouth falls open and he stares back at her unblinking visage before throwing his head back, that barking laugh tearing itself from the depths of his chest.

"You do got a pair on you, don't you?" He quickly turns and ducks, throwing a swift punch to the gut that sends Steve to the floor. "Sneaky, too! I like it!"

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin is struggling against Lucas and the others. "Kick his ass, Steve --"

"Come on, King Steve!" The glee in Billy's eyes is an unholy fire as he straddles his opponent, raining blows down on his unprotected face. "You gonna let the *girls* save ya? Buncha little *kids*? Huh? Huh --"

When Barb had the precious luxury of moments later to think, it was more than clear she'd been this close to stabbing him right in the back of the neck. Except some scrap of sanity made her hesitate, look around and see their nail bats and just as quickly reject that notion before spying a good old cast iron frying pan right there on the stove. She picks it up, takes two steps to get the momentum and lets a full forehand fly that takes him square in the side of that mullet head.

He hits the floor and he's still moving, weak as it is. Struggling to rise --

Then Max is on him. Ramming a needle in his neck.

Oh, right, Barb thinks as Billy hits the floor. *We had that.*

Still, she muses as Max proceeds to extract her concessions, punctuated by a spiked bat between his legs.

It felt like justice.

"Hold still," Nancy commands. "You have to let it dry."

"Like she needs to attract every guy in the place." Barb smiles to ease the tension. "Just one."

Jane's cheeks turn red, making the light layer of makeup yet more pronounced.

"I thought you said this wasn't gonna take long!" Hopper's anxiety echoes up the stairway. "We're on a schedule here --"

"Hold your horses!" Nancy yells.

"And your horseless carriage!" Barb adds. Nancy bursts into giggles, and Barb joins her as Hopper grumbles from below.

"There you go." Nancy smiles, tugging the other girl's lengthening bangs into place. "You'll knock him dead."

Jane turns a shocked gaze upon her.

"Not like that," Barb clarifies.

The look on Hopper's face as they descend the stairs is worth it alone. Jane hugs them both with all her might, causing Nancy to fuss and touch up her face.

"So?" Nancy asks as they shut the door. "You think her and Max will ever get along?"

Barb has to think about that. Then she thinks of kissing Nancy, and then she smiles and doesn't. Better just to think about it.

For now.
